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ABSTRACT

From Reader to Reader is a reading incentive project designed to encourage voluntary reading and promote informal discussions about books among elementary school children. It was developed by members of Alpha Upsilon Alpha Honor Society of the International Reading Association and receives support from the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress as a Year of the Young Reader project. The project provides participating classrooms with stamped postcards and coordinates the exchange of postcards between classes at the same grade level in different states across the United States. Children use the postcards to share their enthusiasm about books they want to recommend to others their own age. Almost all teachers involved in the project have reported that their students were talking more with classmates about books as a result of their involvement in the project. The students offer each other advice and discuss characters, plots, and illustrations as they consider books to recommend. Teachers also report an increase in voluntary reading. All the students who chose to write about the project said they enjoyed it. Teachers are encouraged to develop their own versions of From Reader to Reader. (MG)

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FROM READER TO READER: AN INCENTIVE PROGRAM FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

From Reader to Reader is a reading incentive project designed to encourage voluntary reading and promote informal discussions about books among elementary school children. It was developed by members of Alpha Upsilon Alpha Honor Society of the International Reading Association and receives support from the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress as a Year of the Young Reader project. The project provides participating classrooms with stamped postcards and coordinates the exchange of postcards between classes at the same grade level in different states across the U.S. Children use the postcards to share their enthusiasm about books they think of as special and want to recommend to others their own age.

During its first year, From Reader to Reader involved about 1,300 children in 52 classrooms from five different states--Illinois, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Texas. Or to give this some of the flavor of the place names children saw, cards traveled between Spruce Pine, NC, State College, PA, North Creek, NY, and Convict Hill Road in Austin, TX. In all, more than 6,000 cards recommending books were exchanged by first through sixth graders across the country.

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Organizing the Project

As with most large scale projects, the first step was to locate people within the target states who would be enthusiastic about the project and willing to help with its organization. Tapping our own and the professional associations of colleagues, we found classroom teachers, reading specialists, and school administrators who agreed to serve as coordinators, handling the organizational details within their states and identifying teachers who wanted their students to participate.

Classrooms were matched on the basis of grade level, alone, and designated as "exchange" groups. Most exchange groups were composed of six classrooms at the same grade level from six different states. Teachers in the exchange groups received sets of envelopes, each containing 25 stamped postcards bearing the project name, From Reader to Reader, and an indication of joint sponsorship by the Honor Society and the Center for the Book. The number of envelopes a teacher received depended on the number of classrooms in a particular exchange group. Extra cards were included to accommodate classrooms with more than 25 students. Teachers had their students self-address postcards, using the school address and room number, and then replaced the self-addressed postcards in the envelopes, making sure that each contained a card from every child in the class. State coordinators collected the envelopes and

mailed them to us at project headquarters, where the envelopes were sorted according to exchange groups.

The next package the teachers received had the envelopes containing postcards which had been self-addressed by children from the other classrooms in the exchange group and a set of blank postcards to be used when children wished to respond to someone who had written to them. A list of teachers and school addressed for each classroom in the exchange group was also included. With the list, teachers could contact each other if they wanted to extend the project beyond the limitations imposed by its financial resources. The list also proved useful for instances when a child wanted to write to a peer in the exchange group, but had a postmark as the only clue to the address of the other child.

Implementing the Project

Once teachers received the sets of postcards which had been self-addressed by children in their exchange group, the project was underway. Since the postcards were individually stamped, they could be placed in the mail as soon as children completed their recommendations.

Schools and teachers approached the project in a variety of ways. At the Charles A. Lindbergh School in Kenmore, New York, teachers were already using the Book It! program, and From Reader to Reader became a way of

broadening the social context for talking and writing about books beyond the classroom to the larger community of young readers. In other schools, teachers used From Reader to Reader as an enhancement of their reading, language arts, and library programs. Many teachers reported that they incorporated the project into social studies instruction, using it as the basis for teaching map skills and involving children in making comparisons between the geography and climate of their own area with that of their correspondents. At the Deyton Primary School in Spruce Pine, North Carolina, From Reader to Reader became a whole school project, with a large mural in the hallway where children displayed the postcards they received. The school's principal took an active role in the project, meeting with teachers to discuss how the project could be integrated throughout the curriculum and inviting parents in to talk about the project and view the mural.

Using grade level as the only criteria for matching classrooms resulted in the exchange of postcards between children in bilingual classes and children in English-only classrooms, and the exchange of postcards between mainstreamed, learning disabilities and "gifted" classrooms within a grade level. In general, differences of cultural background or achievement level did not interfere with the children's communicating effectively and enthusiastically

with each other. However, there were some exception, a teacher in one of the primary grade bilingual classes reported that many of the books recommended to her students were too difficult for them to read independently, and a teacher in a gifted class found that often students had already read the books which were being recommended. Several first grade teachers told us that on occasion invented spellings presented a real challenge, but the postcards were eventually deciphered and the recommended books requested from the library.

Building a Community of Young Readers

In assembling the project, our effort was to make its geography as broad and diverse as possible. The goal was not just to give From Reader to Reader a national configuration, but to give the children a variety of correspondents and a sense of adventure as they wrote to people whose experiences might be quite different from their own. The novelty of writing to children from distant states and receiving cards postmarked from other parts of the U.S. were the incentives the project offered to its young readers. The geographic dispersement of participating classrooms promoted an understanding among the children that there are others their own age with whom they can share ideas about books and contributed to the children's developing a sense of a community of readers. While the opportunity of writing to and receiving mail from distant

places provided the incentives, the goal was to create a sense among the children that books can be talked about with other children, that there is a community ready to be made.

The Community of Adult Readers

There is, of course, a community of readers among adults. In its more formal, but non-academic aspects, it includes thousands of book discussion groups across the country and hundreds of book and author luncheons. Informally, it emerges whenever in conversation people recommend books to one another or when books, magazine articles, or newspaper stories are a part of our discussions with one another, so it ranges from passing remarks about a new LeCarre novel or the latest Hollywood or Washington confessional memoir to heated lunch counter or tavern debates over sports page columnists.

The community of readers has some unique features. Because books travel widely, readers can find company across the most amazing distances. For example, at a recent party in Chicago, the evening ended with an animated, informed discussion between three Australians, two Indians, a Rumanian and a number of Americans over a book by a Czechoslovakian novelist. Although the discussions which begin in airports or on commuter trains as one passenger remarks on a book held by another are rarely as international in scope, they are often every bit as companionable. Talking about books is one of the pleasures

of being a reader, and adults often select the books they read in anticipation of a discussion with friends.

Do Children Talk About Books?

On playgrounds and in school corridors, children can be overheard talking with their friends about characters from movies and cartoons and plots from television programs. Rarely ever do book characters or plots enter into their conversations. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress report, Who Reads Best? (NAEP, 1988). Only 8% of third graders in their sample read stories in school in order to "talk with friends" about them and only 5% read out of school for that purpose. The percentage of seventh- and eleventh-graders talking with friends about stories is even smaller, with no more than 5% of the seventh-graders and 2% of the eleventh-graders reporting talking as a purpose for reading either in or out of school.

As children progress through school, books become less and less a topic of conversation, until finally by high school only a minute portion are engaging in one of the social behaviors that define literate adults. Evidently, one of the adult satisfactions of reading is, with rare exception, never very significant for children.

Children's Approaches to Recommending Books

We had access to several hundred of the more than 6,000 postcards exchanged by children. Some teachers sent us xerox copies of cards they thought exemplified their

students' responses to the project; many children wrote directly to us and recommended books. In a few instances, we were given the opportunity of reading all the postcards written by a class. In looking through the postcards, we were interested not only in what books children were recommending, but also in how children approached the problem of communicating with strangers about books. We discovered that the children settled on a number of distinctly conversational strategies for initiating their recommendations.

Initiating question. One of the approaches taken by many of the children is similar to a conversational device used by children and adults alike when they have just been introduced to a stranger and the social circumstances require that someone speak. This approach initiates conversation with a question: "Do you think the weather will hold up?" "Do you come here often?" "Is this your first IRA?" On the postcards, children began: "Have you read Touchdown for Tommy?" or "Did you ever read Sweet Valley Twins?" The question invites a response and a continuation of the conversation. Some children posted a more generic question before offering their recommendation: "Do you like bunnys? If you do you will really like this book. It's called The Runaway Bunny by Margaret Wise Brown." The question, "Do you like bunnys?," asks more about commonality than about bunnies, not unlike, "Is this

your first IRA?" and it gives the judgment that follows, "you will really like...." weight and purpose.

On-going conversation. A slightly more formal opening appeared on a number of cards. Still conversational in character, it also assumes an on-going conversation, again with someone you know very little about, and begins conditionally: "If you like history you will like Indians. It's about a book that is intristing because it has how Columbus sailed across oceans." or "If you like adventure and comety, you'll like Ali Baba Bernstien." or "If you like series of books, then maybe you would like The Baby-sitters Club." Like the other children who began their cards with questions, these writers are testing congeniality and mutual interest, but their more formal sentences assume, as well, a whole range of reader interests. In each of these examples, a community of diverse readers is taken for granted: "If you like a book filled with mystery, adventure, and suspence, as well as the problems of eveyrday and family life, I highly recommend you read The Dollhouse Murders by Betty Ren Wright."

Entering the conversational circle. Many children began their postcards as though a circle of communication had already been formed, and they were contributing to it: "I just read a really interesting book called A Wrinkle in Time." "I read a really neat book called Once a Mouse." "I read a great book called Indian in the Cupboard." "I read a

book called Ask Mr. Bear. I think it is Super!" "I read a poetry book called The New Kid on the Block which was very funny." "I read a book called Polar Express, a fiction, which was exciting because of where the story took place." These straight-forward, first-person openings ("I read...."; "I enjoyed....") suggest an acceptance by the children of an implicit community they can enter by simply announcing their participation.

Personal endorsement. Some children added emphasis to the first-person opening with enthusiastic personal endorsements that have the force and sincerity of salesmanship: "There is a book I know that you might like." "I got this book you would like." A few of the cards that fall into this category sound a bit like product testimonials:

> "I read a book called The Children's Manner Book. I enjoyed this book because it taught me very nice manners. If you read the book it would teach you very nice manners too. This manner book can teach you very, very nice manners.
>
> Your friend, Aaron"

Others preceded their endorsements with introductions:

> "Hi! My name is Steven. I read this book about Diggers and Loaders. I like this book. I just wanted you to know that this book is a good book. I read it two times. I makes you feel like you are driving a

digger or a loader. If you want to read this book go to your library."

Membership in the Community of Readers

The conversational nature of the cards suggests that the children perceive a potential community of readers which they can join or help create with relative ease. When children were asked how the project could be improved, they consistently requested that a way be found for them to continue communicating with their correspondents so they could find out how their recommendations worked out and let others know what they thought of the books they read because of the postcards. The children were requesting that we find a way to help make the community of young readers both sustaining to its reader-members and self-sustaining.

Does From Reader to Reader Make a Difference?

We used two approaches in assessing the effectiveness of From Reader to Reader. At the completion of each year of the project we sent survey forms to the participating teachers. We also sent to the classrooms sets of postcards which we had self-addressed, requesting that teachers and students write and tell us what they thought of the project. On the survey form, we asked, among other questions, whether teachers had observed their children talking more with each other about books, which was one of the objectives for the program. Almost all teachers reported that their children were talking more with classmates about books as a result of

being involved in the project. Teachers observed children talking with each other as they were in the process of making a decision about which of their favorite books they most wanted to recommend. The children offered each other advice and discussed characters, plots, and illustrations as they considered their options. They told each other their reasons for choosing one book rather than another.

The arrival of postcards from such far away and exotic places as Buffalo, Chicago or Austin generated more enthusiastic talk about books as children read their cards to friends and, in many classrooms, displayed their cards on bulletin boards where they could be read by others. Often, the arrival of postcards, was used by teachers as an opportunity for encouraging children who had read a recommended book to share their opinions and add to the comments offered by the sender of the card.

In the survey, we also asked teachers if they had observed their children reading more after becoming involved in the project. Since the majority of teachers in the project had already been using a variety of strategies to encourage reading before the project began, we were pleasantly surprised to find fully one-third of the teachers reporting that the incentive of From Reader to Reader resulted in increased voluntary reading. Children read in order to select a book to recommend, and they treated seriously the recommendations they received from their

correspondents, often taking the postcards with them to the library to insure getting the right book.

Our second method of evaluation--asking teachers and children to write on the postcards we had self-addressed and tell us what they thought of the project--added texture and detail to the responses from the survey. A North Carolina fifth-grade teacher wrote:

> My class has thoroughly enjoyed this project. I believe that each student has gained something very valuable. They can't wait until library time each week, so they can try and locate books that other children have recommended.

One of her students wrote:

> I think this program is really great! I enjoy getting postcards from other students my age. They have recommended books that I have never heard of, but I hope to read them soon. I also enjoy being able to communicate with children in other states. I can't wait to read the books that the other people have recommended. Before I read a book I like to know just enough about it to make me really want to read it. This program does just that. I'm really glad that this program was developed. I think it makes kids want to read. Thanks!

All of the children who chose to write to us about the project said they enjoyed the project. This card from a second grader in New York is characteristic of the cards we received:

> I like doing the book exchange. You make new friends and Pen Pals. I get to read new books, and other people get to read new books to.

The teachers who wrote to us also had very favorable responses to the project. Some teachers offered suggestions for improving the project, and others alerted us to potential problems. One of the problems involved disparities in class size among exchange groups. A Texas bilingual teacher summed it up:

> From Reader to Reader is an excellent program and idea. We have, however, received far too many cards to respond to appropriately. I have 11 students and over 50 postcards to respond to. As my students are not independent writers, this is quite a challenge. We will do our best!

Starting Your Own From Reader to Reader

Although the logistics of maintaining a project with multiple grade levels and schools in several different locales can be rather overwhelming at times, variation on

From Reader to Reader could be undertaken with comparative ease by a school or even an individual teacher. The two essentials for starting your own version of the project are funds for postcards and stamps and contact with at least one other teacher at the same grade level who shares your commitment to involving children in reading and in talking and writing about what they have read. A school administrator or teacher could request funds from their PTA or from a local business. Very little money is needed if each school provides is own cards and postage.

As for finding another class or school with whom to exchange cards, many teachers and school administrators have formed friendships through professional organizations and conferences. These friendships could be the basis for organizing an exchange between two classrooms or two schools of postcards or letters which have books as their primary topic. State IRA Councils could be contacted, also, for assistance in locating teachers or schools interested in cooperating with the project. State Council members usually have a network of professional friends across the country. A local chapter of Alpha Upsilon Alpha Honor Society would be another good source for finding a cooperating teacher or school. Interested teachers and school administrators might also want to consider contacting IRA affiliates or councils

in other English speaking countries. The Desktop Reference to the International Reading Association lists names and addresses for council presidents, Alpha Upsilon Alpha Honor Society advisors, and international affiliate and council presidents.

Hopefully, teachers, who are by profession and perhaps by nature, also, a rather inventive group, will undertake the development of their own versions of From Reader to Reader. For those who do, remember to invite children in the cooperating classrooms to write and tell what they think about the project. That is what we did, and although we had built into the project a number of evaluation procedures, the most affecting--as always in teaching reading--came from the children:

"The Reader to Reader is fun because I like to recommend books. Who is the one that made all this up? Whoever it was sure is smart. I bet you alot of people would like this if they all knew about it. Expecally if I do because I got good taste."